

The cavalier attitude with which most Americans today view prisoners is not fundamentally different from the way most Germans thought of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other so-called "low lifes." Regardless of the rationale used to subject fellow human beings to such horrors, once a society has made the determination that certain people "deserve" to be enslaved, brutalized, and exterminated, it soon loses all inhibitions concerning their economic exploitation. The people of the United States have chosen to embark on just such a sordid journey. It's this unsettling mindset with which we as prison abolitionists must battle against if we expect to be successful in reversing this trend of incarcerating our way to economic prosperity.

Crimes against humanity are taking place daily behind the walls of America's prisons. Men and women, even children, are locked away in concrete tombs to languish for years with only four blank walls to stare at—control units they are called. They are the newest addition to the prison economy. But for the folks in the small community down the road, the cries for money drown out the screams of anguish and despair from those who rot in the belly of the prison beast. Yes, indeed, history does repeat itself. What are we going to do about it—AMERICA?

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## PRISONS AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By

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We are witnessing history repeat itself as the fascist state is gradually being re-created right here in the good ol' U.S. of A. The heartland of capitalism has been busying itself the last ten years formulating and building the 21st century version of the Third Reich. Make no mistake about it, the concentration camps and slave industries are sprouting up like weeds all across the nation. Neo-fascist America is taking shape in many ways, but this article will focus on one of its most disturbing aspects—prisons as economic development.

The fast-paced growth of the American prison industry, with its exorbitant incarceration rates, was originally advertised to the people as a necessary part of the "get tough on crime" movement. Though the public's fear of crime and violence has been stoked to inflammatory proportions, the reality today is that what has become known as the prison/industrial complex has more to do with the economic vitality of communities than it has with criminal justice. Attacking America's lust for prison construction by arguing over the logic of imprisonment, as opposed to other methods of dealing with criminality, is by itself doomed to fail. A twisted form of economics is what increasingly propels the prison business, and that is what we must confront in order to reverse this madness.

Perhaps madness is a misnomer for what is occurring in the United States. Calculated cunning might be a more apt

Description. What is becoming increasingly obvious is that 2  
the prison/industrial complex is an integral component of  
the new capitalist service economy. A new socio-economic  
paradigm has emerged that places the community prison at the  
center of economic activity in an increasing number of  
localities nationwide. It's no coincidence that the explosive  
growth of the prison industry has paralleled the decline of  
the industrial sector in this country.

American society is ominously taking on characteristics  
similar to those made most popular by the German Third Reich  
over sixty years ago. Concentration camps, slave labor  
industries, and mass executions were not simply the maniacal  
machinations of one Adolph Hitler. The Holocaust and the  
system that brought it forth was conceived as part of a  
sophisticated plan to rid the country of "undesirables"  
while at the same time deriving economic benefit from them.  
It was meticulously thought out by the German intelligentsia  
and implemented with the cooperation of the capitalist class  
and blessings of the people.

All those monstrous acts perpetrated by the Nazis took  
place in one of the most "civilized" and well-educated  
societies on earth. A present day society of supposedly  
civilized and well-educated people has chosen to embark on a  
similar journey to the depths of inhumanity. That society  
has a name—AMERICA! If you want to know how a fascist  
regime such as Nazism gains legitimacy in an otherwise sane  
society, just keep your eyes focused on the unfolding  
American political atmosphere as it expands out across the  
land like a toxic cloud. And if you want to see how a society  
can quickly tumble into the dark abyss of genocidal horror,  
just take a long hard look in the mirror my fellow Americans.

We haven't arrived at a new Third Reich—yet—but the  
master class is gradually bringing together the master plan

the use of prisoners as commodities in dealing with chronic 7  
unemployment. Imprisoning the unemployed is a very efficient,  
if not very humanitarian, way to deal with all the problems  
related to their joblessness. Prisons remove the homeless  
and mentally ill off the streets, provides them with shelter,  
and offers them the opportunity to develop a work ethic. The  
unemployed also contribute more as prisoners toward economic  
growth than they otherwise would in the free world.

In the free world a thousand unemployed workers translates  
into a handful of employment office and human services staff  
positions. However, a 1000-bed prison creates several hundred  
jobs both at the prison and in the local business community.  
And prison jobs, if things continue on their present course,  
will last into perpetuity. It's really a devilishly clever  
way to deal with "surplus" workers. As prisoners they aren't  
counted in the unemployment statistics, have their activities  
restricted so as not to be a problem for authorities, provide  
employment for hundreds of other people, and also show up as  
a positive contribution to the GDP. From a capitalist socio-  
economic perspective, what's not to like about it?

Most American communities seem to be tuned-out from the  
oppressive conditions in which prisoners exist behind the walls  
of these economic wonders. Local citizens either don't care,  
don't know, or don't care to know about the despairing state  
of the occupants caged in these human zoos. The prevailing  
mood is that they get what they deserve no matter how horrible  
the conditions are inside the concrete and steel tombs.

When the German concentration camps were liberated toward the  
end of World War 2, the local residents were brought to the  
camps to view the atrocities that had taken place. They  
were either emotionally overwhelmed by the horrors they  
witnessed, or stood in silent indifference to the fate of  
the poor souls forced to languish in hell on earth.

the enemy and it is us."

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Even someone as disbelicible as Adolph Hitler could not implement the socio-economic course pursued by the Nazis without first gaining the cooperation of the citizenry. As Hillary Clinton says, "It takes a village." German concentration camps became an accepted part of the local economic landscape. American communities coast-to-coast are today also becoming addicted to concentration camp economics. Prisons have become part of the grand illusion to cover-up the crisis that consumerist capitalism now finds itself. With all the loud reports of a booming economy it comes as a shock to most people that a crisis even exists. But if all is so well in the land of the gold card, why are so many small communities on the verge of collapse, grasping for whatever jobs they can manage to scavenge up, even the caging of humans?

The rock-solid stability of the prison industry is being increasingly eyed as the savior of destitute communities, both large and small. With such a dependency being developed for warehousing humans, the body harvest can't help but continue to increase. The U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), the measure of all goods and services produced, grew at a rate of 5.8 percent in the fourth quarter of 1999, for an annual sum of over \$9 trillion. But what most people probably don't know is that this leading economic indicator also includes money spent on building and operating the nation's prisons, as well as all the collateral goods and services derived from prison-related economic activity. In other words, every time an American gets sent to prison, the GDP goes up.

A recent report on crime and poverty in America, issued in December 1999 by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation said, "Prisons have become our nation's substitute for effective policies on crime, drugs, mental illness, housing, poverty and unemployment of the hardest to employ." This brings us to

of the prison/industrial complex ... no, the prison/industrial society, with its concomitant supply of scapegoats to fill the cages and slaves in the factories. The burgeoning prison 3 industry currently exploits the hapless souls caught-up in its web in two major ways: prisoner as slave and prisoner as commodity. While exploitation of prison slave labor is on the rise, at this juncture in time the use of prisoners as economic commodities has been the driving force of prison industry expansion.

Touching briefly on the prisoner as slave, some leading American economists have come on board in support of exploiting prison slaves. The May 20, 1999, edition of The Wall Street Journal carried an article by Darren McDermott entitled "Economists Join Debate On Prison Work." In it, Harvard economist Richard Freeman said, "Right now [with the low unemployment rate] would be a great time to increase prison labor," from a worker-shortage point of view. The same article quotes Texas A & M University economist Morgan O. Reynolds saying, "From an economic standpoint, competition between the prison sector and the private sector is good. Production by prisoners creates rather than destroys jobs." According to Morgan, prison slave industries will require raw materials and transport by free world workers. Thus, the prisoner as slave will have a "multiplier effect" on the economy.

A good example of how the prisoner as commodity fuels economic development of small communities can be found in the rural West Texas town of Post. The cereal magnate C.W. Post began building the town in 1907 in the middle of the semi-arid badlands of Garza County. It never developed much beyond its current population of approximately 4,000. Postex Cotton Mills began operation there in 1913 with 250 employees and became the town's largest employer. Dreams of Post hitting

the big-time were dashed when it lost out on a bid in 1916 to become the site of Texas Tech University. That honor went to the then-small town of Lubbock 50 miles to the northwest.

In 1955, Burlington Industries bought the town's Postex Cotton Mills which expanded to employ 450 workers at its height of operation in 1973. But in the early 1980s Burlington followed other corporations who were moving their operations overseas in pursuit of cheaper labor and closed down the mills. The mills' closing was a devastating blow to the Post community. They represented stable employment in a rural area otherwise dominated by the often-shaky businesses of oil, ranching and farming. Post wasn't very successful in recruiting a replacement industry for the Postex Cotton Mills until 1998 when Garza County, of which Post is the county seat, decided to enter the business of warehousing humans.

The 1,094-bed Giles W. Dalby Correctional Facility opened its cages for business in October 1999. Most of the bodies will be those of federal prisoners. As you might expect, the local newspaper was all aglow with the wonderful economic news about how "250 full-time jobs were projected to be created at the facility." The new Warden, Terry Bartlett, delivered good news to the town, saying, "We've been able to hire a good number of local folks, many of whom were looking for solid employment in Post so they could stay around home. We're real excited about bringing those job opportunities to the local community."

Post is just one example of a scenario that has become all too commonplace in hundreds of communities across America. In practically every case, little or nothing is mentioned by the local media about the human dimension of the cage occupants. And whenever they do manage to garner acknowledgment it's usually in animalistic terms. No matter the location—north, south, east or west—the new community prison is

described in the same nonchalant manner as would be used to announce the grand opening of a new WalMart Superstore. The only difference being that whereas the local merchants often view WalMart as an adversary, they glory over the prospect of increased business that will be generated by the infusion of money from the new prison.

The argument is often posited by prison opponents, and rightly so, that the huge expenditure of revenues on prisons takes money away from educational and social programs. The reasoning goes that taxpayers should be outraged over the sacrifice of their children's education at the altar of criminal justice. What seems to be overlooked in this argument, however, is the fact that it's these same taxpayers who are clamoring for prisons to be built in their communities in order to "stabilize" the local economy. Many public school systems obtain much of their funding from local taxes, and human services are increasingly becoming the responsibility of local communities as the welfare state is dismantled. That's why what often is the case today is that prisons are seen by locals as a positive way to generate economic growth and sustain revenues for their schools and community services.

An article dealing with restorative justice alternatives to our current incarceration bings appeared in the September 1999 issue of Graterfriend, a Pennsylvania prisoners' publication. It posed the question to prison builders: "Do you know what you are doing ...?" The answer is, yes, they are fully aware of what they are doing. You see, "they" aren't just a bunch of elitist economic and social planners hiding in the shadows, or punishment freaks who get their kicks from locking people in cages, though these type of people are part of the much bigger picture. "They" are community leaders, local businesspeople, working class taxpayers, friends, neighbors and relatives. As the saying goes, "We have seen